

What's in a Story?

How do we stretch the boundaries of our soul... and live a fully realized life?

Years ago, becoming an elementary school activist forced me out of my comfort zone. But our kids needed a good education, and I had to speak up. Imagine our reaction to the principal's words when we suggested that our daughter, an early reader, needed more challenge: "Don't worry about her. We find the students all 'even out' in the 4th grade."

We got a similar answer when we asked about our son, lost in a big class. Parents got together and demanded some improvements. This upset some long-time teachers. One of them, known for joyously playing the piano and singing to her class, approached me on the playground. She got right in my face: "Stay out of this!" she said. "I've seen kids come and go for thirty years, and I'm telling you, there's nothing new under the sun." She had seen it all. There was no point in talking about change.

Eventually, speaking up and taking the heat was worth it. Things improved. And those words—"there's nothing new under the sun"—still come to mind. They don't always sound so far-fetched. How much *is* new under the sun? Inventions are new. They improve our living conditions and give us longer, healthier lives. They make things happen faster and give us more free time. Problems are new—did we always have overcrowding? An endangered planet? A pace of life with little room to renew and repair our spirits?

Or is there nothing new under the sun? We're made of the very same atoms as our ancestors. We get through the day pretty much the way they did, our eat-sleep-work-play-rest routines predictable season to season. And is there anything new under the sun about what makes humans tick? Like our ancestors, we want peace. Our passions enliven us. We hope our children find love and live meaningful lives. We quest for truth. What makes us tick isn't new. It's as old as the hills....

I've had the pleasure the past few weeks of immersing myself in a life lived here in Reading 150 years ago, the life of Emily Ruggles. A daughter of this church in the mid-1800s, she holds a place of honor in one of our stained glass window. Emily left a diary that reads amazingly alive and intimate and familiar. She was the great-great-niece of Ruth Ruggles White, a beloved member of this church. On this second anniversary of Ruth's passing, we remember her. Ruth was married to George, who sits among us, sometimes at the clavino and always in the choir. Ten years ago, Ruth loaned Emily's diaries to church member Anne Mark and gave permission for them to be transcribed and copies given to the church, town and library archives.

One of eleven in a prominent Reading family, Emily grew up to be a feisty, independent woman. Single all her life and indifferent to things domestic, she lived with family members and paid them rent. One home was the grey Victorian on the corner of Salem and Azalea Streets. Another was up the street from choir members' Lorraine and Steve Dennis's old house—it had a big old bathroom upstairs and a toilet in the pantry off the kitchen!

With that booming voice and great height, Emily must have cut a formidable figure. At a time when few women worked outside the home, she owned and ran that dry goods store downtown. Twice a month without fail, she wrote in her diary: “Went to Boston and bought goods.” She managed the help, and she noted in her diary when she paid bills, when she loaned people money and also when she paid the rent for her church pew! (Make a note, Pledge Drive team!)

Emily kept notes of her real estate deals. “Called on Captain Robinson to buy a pasture.” And in April 1870—she was 43: “Bought the William Parker estate.” She gave this land to the church, and on it, across the street from where the CVS is now, our first church was built. These pews and chandeliers come from that original church, as do many of our organ’s 800 pipes!

Emily rode her horse and buggy to Lynnfield every month to have her horse, called Kitty Lucas, shod. She seemed to have a soft spot for animals, and, after she had to sell Kitty Lucas, she later went to visit her. She had a special place in her heart for children too, with that marvelous inventory of marbles and slingshots. When her nephew Harley was a boy, she and he would go on outings in her buggy. Later, she took him to the train every day so he could ride it to work.

Like our own calendars and journals over the years, the pages of Emily’s diary have a sameness to them. Twice a year, in April and November, she’d write, “Mrs. Holt came to cut some dresses for me.” Once, a waterproof dress! Always on the move, Emily filled her days with activities. She belonged to social groups, which met like clockwork. The Social Readers met on evenings in one another’s houses and recited literary pieces to each other. The Literary and Dramatic Association put on shows.

The Sewing Circle (they also have a window) made aprons and pinafores. They bound shoes, as shoe-making was quite a business in Reading. And they made quilts, a tradition here too. Every other week, Emily wrote, “Took tea with the Circle” at Mrs. Garfield’s, or Mrs. Walker’s or Mrs. Pratt’s or at the sisters Prescott. When she’d write, “Put in quilts for the Circle,” that meant that she moved a quilt frame from house to house. She’d set up the quilt in it, the women would work on it, and afterward she’d collapse it to take to the next host’s house.

That Sewing Circle became today’s Liberal Ladies. This group meets monthly for a morning of mutual support and intellectual exploration, and all women are invited to join.

These gatherings and errands were Emily’s rounds. Her scheduled activities. She had a busy social life, too. Her diary is dotted with summer afternoons of croquet, days passed at the pond, and, in the winter, rides to the pond “to see them cut ice.” She and her friends would go visiting—to Brighton, Cambridge, Stoneham, Nahant. They’d spend whole afternoons and evenings together, everyone piling into a carriage—or a sleigh in the winter. If it got too late for the ride home to Reading, they’d all stay the night. A far cry from the way we drive around alone in our cars!

Emily had several close, intense friendships. Though she did not write in her diary about matters of the heart, we can see that some friendships lasted all her life, and others appear to

have ended mid-stream. How did she weather these relationships? Surely, like the rest of us, with a mix of happiness and heartache. It's hard to know.

Her diary leaves no doubt, though, about her spiritual core: what made her spirit sing and what caused her blood to boil. What mattered greatly to this woman was her passion for social justice and knowledge. In her thirties, during the Civil War, she was so mad women couldn't become soldiers, that she paid for a Mississippi man, to fight under her name. (An African American, he survived.) After the war, Emily joined the suffrage movement. She knew many of its leaders and was good friends with Universalist Mary Livermore, a journalist, abolitionist and renowned advocate of women's rights. Emily heard Victoria Woodhall speak—Woodhall was an activist for women's rights and labor reforms, the first woman to start a weekly newspaper and in 1872 the first woman candidate for the US presidency.

For Emily, as for many of us, faith played a central role in her life. She was a pillar of this church and on Sundays she went to one, often two and sometimes three church services—and back then, sermons came in large helpings, often running upwards of an hour! She might hear one minister preach in Reading, then travel to Concord or Weymouth to hear others.

Perhaps the Universalist message of a loving God, a God who embraces every person, had special meaning for Emily. “Salvation for All” was sunny and optimistic compared to what was preached elsewhere in town. Emily traveled to far-flung churches with her dear friend Phebe Hanaford, another daughter of our church and one of the first woman ministers ordained in this country. On trips together through New England, out to Niagara Falls and back through Canada, Phebe, a gifted preacher and author, would preach in town after town about women's rights and temperance.

Emily also traveled to Universalist conventions in the big cities, much like Unitarian Universalists today renew and celebrate our faith at our annual General Assembly, called GA. This June, by the way, GA is temptingly close, in Providence. Imagine 6,000 people in a room, singing “Spirit of Life”! Not only that, but our own Mary Newman is the GA choir director this year! You can attend GA for a day or a week. See the poster in the atrium for information.

While Emily's diary entries describe a woman of action and ideas, a rare reflective entry one September evening gives us another view of her: “Went to Boston in the morning and bought goods, after closing my store and taking tea went to walk in the moonlight over Woburn Street.” Woburn Street! Right here, right outside our door, Emily made room for a walk after a full day. A walk in the moonlight.

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Emily Ruggles didn't write about her beliefs or feelings, but sitting in these pews, under these chandeliers, may have been her way of putting the work and meetings and socializing on hold. Her way of coming to a full stop and tending to her spirit. How do you tend to your spirit?

Episcopal Seminary professor Corinne Ware suggests we have basic spiritual styles. This is how someone once explained them to me. Picture four quadrants: head, heart, hands and an exclamation point.

HEART HANDS

HEAD SPIRIT

- People with an intellectual spiritual style (think: “head”) are fed by learning, theology, facts and history.
- People with an emotional spiritual style (“heart”) are nurtured by stories about human nature and connection.
- People with a social justice spiritual style (“hands” or help”) experience spirituality thru causes and helping others.
- I think of the fourth style as “holy” or “spirit.” These are people drawn to mystery and mysticism.

Dr. Ware observes that people tend to “ride” one of these two axes. If your spirituality is nurtured by knowledge, you may appreciate spiritual messages that also appeal to “hand/help” people who identify with causes and social justice. You might respond to a quiet worship service of chanting, say, with a frustrated, “Where’s the beef?”

People whose spirituality resonates with in emotions and stories and whose who yearn for quiet centering might live more along this axis. They love personal sermons and might come away from a rousing call to action not having felt touched spiritually.

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Emily Ruggles seems to have engaged in all these spiritual styles. She fed her intellect listening to all those sermons every week. She had that sweet relationship with her nephew, her favorite horse, and many good friends. She was an activist—she worked hard to make a difference and surely felt the momentum of the suffrage movement which, 20 years after her death, finally succeeded. And that walk in the moonlight suggests that Emily sought deep peace from time to time.

What is your spiritual style? What helps you come to a full stop? When you feel hemmed in by your routine, or tired of it—when you wonder if there’s anything new under the sun, what lifts your spirit? What enlivens you?

Many people experience all these spiritual styles, but I’m curious! Who identifies with the head/hands axis? And who see themselves on the heart/spirit axis? Seeing where we naturally land can feel good. It also gives us a clue about ways we can stretch.

Which brings us back to the question: How do we stretch the boundaries of the soul and live a fully realized life? By living fully.

The next time we walk the dog in the moonlight on Woburn Street and holy mystery fills the night sky, let us remember that we walk in the footsteps of our ancestors. As we sit in these pews that held them, in the light of the chandeliers that shined on them, let us remember that, in living fully—learning, loving, helping and quieting—we will grow into our whole selves.

The raw material of our lives is indeed ancient under the sun, but what we do with it sparkles with newness every day.